"Believing Women" in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an

Asma Barlas
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Does the Qur'an permit the oppression of women? Can women pursue equality and remain within the framework of its teachings? In this original and thought-provoking work, Barlas attempts to address these controversial questions.

In the preface, Barlas asks whether the Qur'an is a patriarchal text, and acknowledges that while this question might not be meaningful from the perspective of the Qur'anic text itself, Muslim women today are confronted with frankly patriarchal exegeses. In order to open up a discursive space for her reading, Barlas asserts that various readings of the Qur'an should not be confused with the text itself, and that since Islam has no clergy, women can reclaim the right to interpret the Qur'an. Contrary to both conservative and progressive Muslims, she argues that the Qur'an challenges inequality and oppression.

Chapter 1, "The Qur'an and Muslim Women: Reading Patriarchy, Reading Liberation," which is subdivided into five sections, introduces the main lines of argument, defines key terms, explains her methodology, and outlines the book's plan. Barlas defines a patriarchal or misogynistic text as one depicting God as Father/male, teaching that God has a special relationship to males, that maleness symbolizes divine attributes (while females are looked upon as deficient), or presenting the role of husband/father as a manifestation of God's rule. By contrast, a text promoting liberation would "allow us to theorize equality, sameness, similarity or equivalence, as the context demands, of women and men." In addition, its teachings about human creation, ontology, sexuality, and marriage would challenge inequality and patriarchy. The questions of why Muslims read the Qur'an as teaching inequality and how a liberatory Qur'anic hermeneutics can be developed are introduced.

The remainder of the book is divided into two parts. Part One contains chapter 2, "Texts and Textualities: The Qur'an, Tafsir, and Ahadith," and chapter 3, "Intertextualities, Extratextual Contexts: The Sunnah, Shari'ah, and the State." Chapter 2 discusses the relationship between particular methods of interpretation and specific readings of the Qur'an, and various ways of conceptualizing the relationships among texts, method, and time. Chapter 3 considers how definitions of knowledge and the canon, as well as the state, law, and tradition, shaped Qur'anic exegesis and placed limits on how the Qur'an might be legitimately interpreted.

Part Two contains chapters 4 through 6. Chapter 4, "The Patriarchal Imaginary of Father/s: Divine Ontology and the Prophets," discusses the nature of Divine self-disclosure in the Qur'an. Barlas attempts to show that the Qur'an rejects the religious patriarchal representation of God as Father/male and the prophets as fathers of their communities.

Chapter 5, "The Qur'an, Sex/Gender, and Sexuality: Sameness, Difference, Equality," discusses the Qur'anic perspective on gender and

sexuality. It is argued that as the Qur'an does not give any symbolic meaning to biological differences, one cannot easily derive a theory of gender (or gender inequality) from it. Barlas points to the differences between western patriarchal theories of gender and the Qur'an's approach to the question, and argues that the Qur'an teaches that men and women have similar sexual natures and needs.

Chapter 6, "The Family and Marriage: Retrieving the Qur'an's Egalitarianism," discusses the differences among western patriarchal, feminist, and Qur'anic concepts of mothers and fathers, wives and husbands. Barlas maintains that the Qur'anic view of fathers and mothers and the responsibilities of parents differ greatly from patriarchal conceptions of these, and that the Qur'an affirms the equality of wives and husbands. The controversial questions of male guardianship, wife beating, adultery, polygamy, and divorce also are examined.

The book concludes with a postscript that considers the question of whether texts are responsible for how they are read. A short glossary of Arabic terms used is provided, along with a select bibliography and general index. Four diagrams intended to clarify the relationships between the Qur'an, other key Muslim texts, and the Shari'ah also accompany the text.

Barlas asks why Muslims read the Qur'an as teaching inequality, and answers that they read specific verses about marriage, divorce, and inheritance, and infer from these that women are very different from and ontologically inferior to men. She argues that such conservative readings are based on reading verses in isolation, as well as on secondary texts reflecting the misogyny of the time in which they were recorded and have come to overshadow the Qur'an's message.

Barlas presents an alternative Qur'anic hermeneutic based on God's self-disclosure in the Qur'an as One, Just, and Incomparable. She reasons that the Qur'anic understanding of monotheism does not allow males to share in God's sovereignty or become intermediaries between women and God. As God is supremely just, God's speech cannot teach injustice. She asserts that although people may have differing views of what injustice is, teachings that represent women as incompletely human, justify abuse, or deny women agency and dignity are clearly unjust and cannot be attributed to God. Finally, God cannot be represented in anthropomorphic terms either as or like a male.

Citing a number of Qur'anic verses to this effect, Barlas advocates reading the Qur'an as a textual unity. Taking the discussion beyond its usual

limits, she points to verses that instruct believers to follow "the best" in the revelation (7:145; 39:18). She defines "the best" as that which is just and fair. Both the promise and the pitfalls of this approach are illustrated in her discussions of various contentious issues.

Throughout the book, Barlas is in dialogue with Muslim feminist scholars, particularly Amina Wadud and Leila Ahmed, and builds on their insights as well as those of such academics as Fazlur Rahman, Mohammed Arkoun and Mustansir Mir. Her critical engagement of western feminist work sharpens her analysis. However, two ill-defined groups, progressive and conservative Muslims, are not treated as serious partners in dialogue. Progressives, apparently Muslims committed to secular solutions to Muslim problems, are criticized for ceding interpretive authority to clerics and thus unwittingly acquiescing in women's oppression. However, their past and present impact on the interpretive discourse receives little attention.

Barlas uses *conservative* to refer to "Muslims who adhere to the notion of the canon's closure and thus do not favor new developments in religious knowledge." This catch-all term includes scholars who consistently remain within the traditional medieval interpretive framework and such Islamists as Maulana Abu'l Ala Maududi, who do in fact permit new approaches to some sociopolitical issues. Conservative exegeses are used mainly in the book as a grim background over against which Barlas offers readings that she presents as liberating. The recent development of less restrictive interpretations by such scholars as Muhammad al-Ghazali and Rashid al-Ghanoushi, and the emergence of such modern female exegetes as Zainab al-Ghazali and A'ishah 'Abd-al-Rahman, are not taken into consideration.

The book does not discuss the views of classical exegetes in any depth and refers only to secondary sources when describing them. These shortcomings are unfortunately likely to limit the book's credibility for many Muslims, and to limit its impact on the modern interpretive discourse.

Nonetheless, this book is ground-breaking and should find a place in university courses on modern Qur'anic interpretation, Muslim feminism, and modern Muslim thought. It provides insight into the intellectual underpinnings of a small but growing Muslim women's intellectual movement, as well as much hermeneutical food-for-thought.

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